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ABSTRACT

This report provides an overview of southeastern state efforts to assist low-performance schools in building capacity to improve students' academic achievement. High poverty, poor economic resources, and a high turnover rate of both students and practitioners are factors that impede school improvement. High-poverty schools that do improve commonly show the following attributes: a focus on the academic success of every student, openness to experimentation, commitment to involving everyone in solutions, a sense of family within the school, a culture of collaboration and trust, and a passion for learning and growing. Examples of state assistance are presented for six southeastern states. Program designs include putting full-time teachers on contract with the state, working with and through districts collaboratively, and providing assistance at the district and school levels. The assistance process is aided when supported by district superintendents and central offices. Solutions include maintaining continuity of school staffing and ensuring that the external assistance provided allows the school to improve, instead of becoming more top-down and rigid in its organization as a reaction to being on probation. An appendix describes state/district policies that support improved conditions in high-poverty school. (Contains 13 references.) (RT)

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A SERVE Special Report

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Assisting Low-Performing Schools in the Southeast

2002

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Preface

Over the last six years, as a result of factors such as the 1994 federal Title I legislation (requiring state departments of education to identify and provide assistance to low-performing schools) and the commitment of key state leaders to setting standards and improving student achievement, all six states in the Southeast (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina) have developed strategies to provide assistance to low-performing schools. SERVE, a federally funded Regional Educational Laboratory serving these six states, has provided opportunities for states to share their experiences in developing and implementing these strategies by hosting annual regional meetings of the state department staff involved in delivering assistance to low-performing schools. This SERVE *Special Report* provides an overview of southeastern state efforts as a way of building the knowledge base about this evolving and important role.

This report will benefit policymakers and state, district, and other leaders involved in the process of assisting low-performing schools in building their capacity to overcome the challenges they face in ensuring that all children have the opportunity to learn at high levels. Educators in schools facing the complex challenges of accelerating student learning may also find this resource helpful in understanding the issues they face.

Introduction

The 1994 reauthorization of Title I outlined a new role for states and districts in supporting higher achievement for all students, particularly those in high-poverty schools. The assumptions were that states must define clear standards or expectations for student performance, assess school standing relative to the standards, and identify those schools that need assistance. The logic for having federal requirements (associated with Title I funding) for states to identify and assist low-performing schools is summarized in the statement below:

> Low-performing schools rarely have the capacity to make (necessary) changes on their own. While much of what it takes to turn around a low-performing school can occur only within the school itself and with the cooperation and commitment of the school staff, states and school districts must provide the critical impetus and support for the process of change. By setting high academic standards, holding all schools accountable for performance, and identifying schools that do not meet those standards, states and districts are taking important steps to raise expectations for all students. For schools that do not meet expectations, states and districts can do much to provide the support necessary to help them focus on improving teaching and learning. (U.S. Department of Education, 1998)

A majority of states now have accountability systems that provide rewards or sanctions based on levels of school performance (National Dropout Prevention Center, 1999). The intent of such policies is to "create incentives for educators to focus on important outcomes. They also provide a means of allocating resources, such as instructional assistance,

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to schools in which performance measures indicate problems" (National Research Council, 1999).

Poverty is clearly a risk factor for a school's identification as *low performing* in terms of state test scores. Schools that have the highest numbers of students in poverty tend to have lower state test score averages. Reporting this correlation is not meant to imply that schools with high numbers of students in poverty cannot perform at the same level as schools with students with economic advantages. There are schools with high-poverty rates that have achieved high performance levels. However, it is important to acknowledge that poverty is an important context variable for school achievement.

Around 65% of the elementary schools in the six southeastern states identified as high-poverty schools fall into the bottom 20% of schools in their state in terms of average school scores on third-grade reading tests. In contrast, less than 5% of the elementary schools identified as low-poverty schools fall into the bottom 20%. Close to 70% of the low-poverty schools fall into the top 20% of schools in their state in terms of average school scores on third-grade reading achievement tests, whereas less than 5% of high-poverty schools fall into the top 20%.

In national assessments of student achievement (provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progress—NAEP), the Southeast consistently scores lower than other regions of the country (see **http://nces.ed.gov/nations reportcard**). In addition, the Southeast, as a region, has higher levels of poverty and lower levels of adult educational status.

In all SERVE states except North Carolina, the percentage of children in poverty in 1997 was greater than the national average of 21% (ranging from 22% in Florida to 30% in Mississippi). All six states have higher percentages of adults over the age of 25 with less than a high school diploma than the national average of 17% (ranging from 18% in Florida to 23% for Mississippi). There are an estimated 1,850 schools in the Southeast that have over 75% of their students eligible for free or reduced lunch status and, thus, could be considered to be at risk for low-performing status based on the high correlation between poverty levels and achievement levels.

What do we know about what high-poverty schools are up against? Such schools are located in communities that have few economic resources prompting educators in such schools to argue that they need more resources to meet the more extreme student needs. Students have less parental resources (e.g., education levels) to draw from and often enter school without the readiness skills they need. Another problem is that many of these schools have high student-mobility rates. When turnover is high, the curriculum tends to slow down, which means that the remaining students have less opportunity to learn than students in schools that have less turnover (The College Board, 1999).

High-poverty schools also tend to have high turnover among teachers and principals that further undermines the quality of the academic program. Most critically, these schools have difficulty finding qualified teachers and, therefore, have high numbers of beginning teachers, permanent substitutes, and teachers teaching out of field, thus compounding the problems associated with having a high number of students in need of academic acceleration (Carter, 2000).

Building the Internal Capacity of High-Poverty Schools

Will sanctions for low-test scores alone cause high-poverty schools to raise student test scores? Some state accountability systems that reward and punish individual schools based primarily on their state test scores may reflect the assumption that staff in many high-poverty schools have the "know how" to reach and teach their students more effectively, but they just aren't doing it. Those knowledgeable on educational issues suggest otherwise. According to a recent (1999) report by the Committee on Title I Testing and Assessment:

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Experience since 1994 suggests that, although some schools and communities are showing success, their practices are not widely shared, and knowledge about how to implement effective instructional strategies to help all students learn to challenging standards is also largely unknown. Recent research suggests that the amount and kind of professional development is inadequate to meet teachers' needs and that teachers continue to feel unprepared to teach all students to challenging standards. In our view, standards-based policies can affect student learning only if they are tied directly to efforts to build the capacity of teachers and administrators to improve instruction.

In addition, the Committee reported that "schools threatened with severe penalties are not changing their instructional practices in fundamental ways. Instead, they seem to focus on short-term gains in test scores, rather than deep improvements in student learning" (National Research Council). The Committee concluded that

> assistance should be aimed at strengthening schools' capacity for educating all students to high standards and to building the internal accountability within schools. Without developing school capacity, accountability leads to inappropriate practices, such as efforts to increase test scores without improving student learning. (National Research Council)

How can states, districts, and other organizations provide assistance that helps to build capacity? There is little research suggesting the existence of one-size-fits-all programs that will "fix" high-poverty, low-performing schools. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. In a 1997 study of factors found in common at 26 successful Title I schools, researchers from the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas found "more differences than similarities in the instructional programs and approaches": some used phonics, some used whole language, some used constructivist learning, others used direct instruction, some used technology, others did not. Thus, there did not seem to be any "silver bullet" program to recommend to other schools.

What this study and other similar studies have shown is that successful, high-poverty schools share similarities in the kinds of beliefs that guide teachers' work. That is, visitors to the schools would notice behaviors reflecting the following values:

- A focus on the academic success of every student

Table 1: Percentage of Schools in Each State by Percentage of Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL)[1]

State	Percentage of Students Eligible for FRL			
	0%–24%	25%–49%	50%–74%	75%–100%
Alabama (n=1,293)[2]	28.5%	23.7%	27.5%	20.2%
Florida (n=2,603)	34.7%	18.6%	28.6%	18.1%
Georgia (n=1,762)	31.7%	19.3%	30.0%	19.1%
Mississippi (n=863)	8.0%	10.9%	43.5%	37.7%
North Carolina (n=1,910)	38.7%	24.2%	25.6%	11.5%
South Carolina (n=1,015)	25.9%	20.2%	30.6%	23.3%
SERVE Region (n=9,446)	30.7%	20.0%	29.7%	19.6%

Source: 1998–1999 Common Core of Data Early Release Files, National Center for Education Statistics. These early release files have not incorporated any corrections received from the states, and states have not reviewed the edits performed by NCES.

[1] A *school* is defined here as a public elementary/secondary school that does not focus primarily on vocational, special, or alternative education.

[2] *n* refers to the number of schools with available data, not to the total number of schools.

- A mentality of no excuses for poor performance
- An openness to experimentation
- A commitment to involving everyone in solutions
- A sense of family within the school
- A culture of collaboration and trust
- A passion for learning and growing

(For more on this study, see **www.starcenter.org/promise/research.htm**. Also see *Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: A Guide for State and Local Leaders* at **www.ed.gov/pubs/turning/part3.html** and *Dispelling the Myth: High-Poverty Schools Exceeding Expectations* at **www.edtrust.org**.)

Improving school quality is at heart a "people process" that requires effective school leaders who engage teachers in collaboratively implementing a challenging curriculum around clear goals and reflecting on how they can improve the quality of each student's work. A recent study of selected high-performing, high-poverty schools (*No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools* at **www.heritage.org**) concluded that the principals of these schools put staffing and high standards for teachers at the core of their improvement efforts.

The principals went to extreme lengths to hire and then develop the right kinds of teachers for their students. The author concluded, "The inadequate training of teachers is the single most debilitating force at work in American classrooms today. Overcoming this failure is perhaps the single greatest accomplishment of high-performing, high-poverty schools."

This high level of commitment to the development of effective teachers through job-embedded professional development as described above is not the norm in many low-performing schools. Housman and Martinez (2001) suggest that teachers and principals in low-performing schools tend to work in isolation rather than as part of a professional learning community. They suggest that the only way to change habits of practice that have evolved through professional isolation is to provide structured opportunities for teachers to work together on improving their practice during the school day.

They note that teachers' low expectations for students in low-performing schools are a problem and that experience has shown shifts in these low expectations when teachers acquire new tools and see for themselves that students can be more successful. They report that district administrators have found that many teachers in low-performing schools have potential to be effective given the right support, but this support is often not provided.

> Unfortunately, however, most teachers are being asked to do what they have not been able to do before, and in a context for which they have not been adequately prepared. Consequently, teachers who express low expectations for their students often feel demoralized by the fact that they lack the skills and tools to help these students learn.

Similarly, in a U.S. Department of Education Regional Forum on Turning Around Low-Performing Schools report (*CPRE Policy Bulletin*, 2001), it is noted that professional development and support for teachers and administrators is critical in any effort to improve student outcomes in low-performing schools.

> Participants took issue with the public perception that teachers in these schools are unmotivated or unqualified; many teachers are simply not trained sufficiently to provide effective instruction in their school settings, especially with the inclusion of greater numbers of students with disabilities.... It is especially difficult to implement programs of instructional change in schools with high rates of teacher vacancy and attrition.... There is also a shortage of principals qualified to provide the kind of instructional leadership needed for schools to reach ambitious achievement goals.

The incompatibility of improving the quality of the instructional program in schools where there are yearly changes in school leaders and faculty is a key point to ponder when designing assistance programs. Mintrop et al. (2001) posit that if administrator, teacher, and student mobility rates are high, it may be very difficult to engender teacher commitment to the school as an organization.

> At a certain level of turnover, school operations become ephemeral, and the school site ceases to be the strategic unit of educational improvement. In this case, schools on probation may need baseline stabilization first, before they can hope to undertake ambitious instructional reform projects. In most cases, the strategic unit for such baseline stabilization, however, is not the school as effective organization, but the district or state as the units that provide the necessary externally induced stability or (as it often happens) instability. As for the school site, lack of control makes organizational accountability fictitious.

In other words, some stability in staffing may be a precondition for a successful assistance process.

As attention is increasingly focused on building capacity in low-performing schools, lessons will continue to emerge about how states, districts, and other organizations can best assist them. Below is a discussion of the kinds of state assistance efforts underway in the Southeast.

The State Role in Assisting Low-Performing Schools

The number of high-poverty schools (over 75% of students eligible for free/reduced lunch) in the six southeastern states is around 1,850, ranging from 220 in North Carolina to 472 in Florida. The number of schools each state formally identifies as "low performing" is somewhat subjective depending on where the line is drawn regarding satisfactory

test scores and what other factors are added into the accountability or accreditation process. Thus, a school officially graded or labeled "low performing" in one state may not be identified as such in another state.

Of the six states, Alabama, Florida, and North Carolina had the earliest legislation for identifying and providing assistance to low-performing schools. Florida began identifying low-performing schools in 1995 with 158 schools identified. In the next year, 71 schools were identified, followed in subsequent years by 30, 4, 78, and 4 schools. North Carolina identified 122 K–8 schools as low performing based on 1996–1997 data. Forty-three schools were identified after the 1999–2000 school year. Alabama had a total of 96 schools identified in 1999–2000.

In identified schools for 1998–1999, the average percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch ranged from 77% in the Alabama schools to 89% in the North Carolina schools (Table 2). Clearly, more extreme levels of poverty are a significant challenge in low-performing schools.

Once low-performing schools are identified, how will they be assisted in making improvements? Southeastern states are in the early stages of experimentation with their strategies for assisting low-performing schools and/or districts. Alabama, Florida, and North Carolina have had school identification and assistance programs in place for several years.

Mississippi has had an accreditation system for many years that provided for "grading" district performance, but recent legislation (2000) moved grading and subsequent external reviews to the school level. Similarly, South Carolina had legislation in the mid-1980s that called for the identification of "impaired" districts with provisions for subsequent external review and support, but 1998 legislation required school level ratings. If a school is identified as "unsatisfactory," an external review is triggered. Throughout the 1990s, Georgia had an Office of School Improvement offering assistance upon request to schools, but it has only recently enacted legislation that will mandate that assistance be provided to some schools.

Each of the six southeastern states has developed a somewhat unique approach to assistance reflecting the state context (amount and sources of funding available, number of schools in the state, history of state versus local control of educational policy, degree of specification for assistance outlined in state legislation, etc.). Thus, perhaps the best way to get the flavor of each state's approach is to consider the following highlights. (The information reported here was initially gathered from reports by state staff at the annual SERVE conferences on this topic and subsequently refined through reviews of this document by state department staff.)

Alabama

- Legislation enacted in 1995 mandated the use of national norm-referenced tests for student assessment purposes and the implementation of a school and school system classification system. A school or school system is placed on "Academic Alert" if a majority of its students or schools scored below the 23rd percentile.
- In 1997–1998, the Alabama SDE hired 14 teachers and 12 part-time administrators to work with schools identified as "Alert" schools. Schools are labeled as "Clear," on "Caution" status, or on "Alert" status. "Alert" schools that do not progress on state test scores become "Alert 2" schools and then "Alert 3" schools.
- The legislation requires all schools on "Alert" status to conduct a self-study, examine the causes for low achievement, and develop a plan for improvement. The school submits both this plan and an end-of-year progress report to the SDE.
- In 1998, the SDE was reorganized into ten teams serving ten geographic regions and having staff representing each of the different programs of the Department. Each of the teams has a team leader who is responsible for monitoring assistance to the "Alert" schools in his or her geographic region.
- The Department identifies Special Services Teachers—outstanding teachers nominated by local superintendents and on loan to the SDE to assist teachers in "Alert" schools. Each "Alert" school has a Special Services Teacher assigned by the SDE who works full-time at the school site. The Special Services Teachers assigned to the "Alert" schools work closely with the state team leader for their geographic region to bring in

Table 2:
Identified Low-Performing Schools in Three States

State	Identified low-performing schools in 1998–1999	Average % of students eligible for free/ reduced lunch	Number of high-poverty schools (75% or greater of students eligible for free/reduced lunch)
Alabama	91	77%	261
Florida	78	83%	472
North Carolina	13	89%	220

Note: As of 1998–1999, Mississippi and South Carolina were identifying districts (not schools) and Georgia had not yet implemented a program for identifying schools.

the SDE and other consultants as needed. Each school also receives services from state-contracted principal mentors who visit a selected set of "Alert" schools regularly.

- "Alert" schools that do not improve from year to year are labeled "Alert 3" schools. When a school is labeled "Alert 3," the State Board of Education authorizes state intervention and a Chief Academic and a Chief Administrative Officer are assigned full-time to help it improve.

Contact: Anita Buckley-Commander, Alabama State Department of Education, Montgomery, Alabama

Florida

- Every public school in Florida is in the improvement process and must have an annual school improvement plan that delineates how schools will address the Sunshine State Standards for curriculum and instruction. Based upon the status of student performance on statewide assessments measuring progress on the standards, schools receive a performance grade of "A" through "F."

- All "D" or "F" schools are targeted for intervention through a law that requires each district to develop and implement a two-year plan of assistance and intervention for identified schools. The Florida Department of Education (DOE), in turn, works collaboratively as a resource to districts.

- The state is divided into five service regions with two DOE Office of School Improvement staff named as team leaders for the region. Team leaders from the DOE visit identified "F" schools and collaboratively rework plans and help identify service providers. The Office of School Improvement coordinates with other regional and statewide service providers for staff development, acts as a clearinghouse for best practices, and coordinates and brokers services with state-funded regional service centers (Area Centers for Educational Enhancement) that offer schools curriculum alignment and assessment training.

- The state does not mandate on-site assistance teams for schools but provides them in collaboration with the school district when needed. The state assistance may last as long as needs and resources dictate. The assistance teams, when provided to schools, are fluid in nature. In some cases, an informal team is assigned for a whole year, and in other cases, a fluctuating group is used as technical assistance needs in the school evolve. District-level assistance continues alongside any state-provided technical assistance.

- The assistance focus (when teams are formed in collaboration with district-provided assistance and as determined by school needs) includes establishing after-school tutoring programs, providing targeted teacher training, helping with grant applications, coordinating work from outside consultants, assisting with data analysis, and aligning curriculum and instructional delivery.

- Florida does not have takeover legislation for situations in which identified schools do not progress, but consistent with the emphasis on working with local boards, the State Board of Education can direct local school boards to make significant changes including reconstitution and parental choice options.

Contact: Andrea Willett, Division of Public Schools and Community Education, Florida Department of Education, Tallahassee, Florida

Georgia

- Georgia had an Office of School Improvement in the State Department of Education that provided assistance to schools upon request throughout the 1990s; no process or standards existed for identifying low-performing schools during that time.

- HB 1187, effective July 1, 2000, requires that schools be given grades of "A" through "F" (beginning in 2003) based on the state-administered Criterion Referenced Competency Tests. For schools with grades of "D" or "F," the Office of Educational Accountability shall recommend appropriate levels of interventions (based on a scale of increasingly severe types of intervention) to the State Board of Education.

- The law also offers that a district may request voluntary assistance for under-performing schools through one of Georgia's regional educational service agencies (RESA) that will appoint an Instructional Care Team for the school in question for as long as services are needed.

- An Instructional Care Team will consist of up to five experienced teachers and one experienced principal along with a reading specialist; these members will be selected from a list of the potential people who could serve in this capacity that each RESA will develop. The State Board will contract with each RESA for each Instructional Care Team supplied to a school.

- Beginning in 2003 (when school grading begins), "D" or "F" schools can receive a mandated School Improvement Intervention Team. The identified team leader assigned to a particular school will be in the

school every day. Other resource members will participate to compliement the team leader and will be identified through recruitment in the regional service area.

- The state will select and pay for the services of these team leaders and members directly as needed, most likely through contracts and per diem allowances rather than full-time employment.
- Until the official school-rating system is implemented in 2003, schools may also request assistance from state-funded school improvement teams. An effort is underway to encourage all low-performing schools to request this kind of assistance prior to the full implementation of the state accountability system.

Contact: Nettie Holt, Executive Director, Student Achievement Unit, Georgia Department of Education, Atlanta, Georgia

Mississippi

- Mississippi has legislation from the 1980s that provides an accreditation system that rates districts based on test scores and other factors. A Level 1 rating is the lowest of five levels assigned. In the past, the assistance provided by the state consisted of requiring all administrators in such districts to participate in a state-developed, leadership-training program established around 1995. In addition, one Mississippi Department of Education (DOE) staff member was assigned to each Level 1 district as a liaison to provide support as needed.
- Recent legislation (2000) requires that the State Board develop a school improvement program for low-performing priority schools. This school improvement program must be in place no later than December 31, 2002. The school improvement program for identified priority schools begins 15 days after the school receives notification of this status, when the State Board must assign an Evaluation Team to the school.
- The Evaluation Team assigned to a school consists of a minimum of seven trained members identified by the DOE and is to include a superintendent, school principals, at least two teachers, a curriculum coordinator, a school board member, community leader, parent, and higher education personnel. These team members are independent of the school and not employees of the DOE. The team may include retired educators.
- The Evaluation Team will develop an evaluation report on the school to be submitted to the State Superintendent for approval. The report shall identify any personnel who are found to be in need of improvement and who need to participate in a professional development plan. A DOE representative along with the Evaluation Team leader will present the Evaluation Plan findings to the school and district and to the school community. Based on these findings, the DOE and the Evaluation Team leader shall assist local school officials in developing and implementing a school improvement plan. The DOE shall assist the priority school in identifying funds necessary to fully implement the school improvement plan.
- Consequences for lack of improvement over time are in place at different levels. If the Evaluation Team deems the school principal to be in need of improvement and he or she has been in place for three or more years and, at the end of the second year, the school continues to be a priority school, the local school board shall dismiss the principal in a manner consistent with state law. If the Evaluation Team deems a teacher to be in need of improvement and he or she fails to improve after the second year of a professional development plan, the local school shall dismiss the teacher. In addition to principals and teachers, consequences are outlined for superintendents and members of the local school board.
- Finally, if a school continues to be a priority school after three years of implementing a school improvement plan or if more than 50% of the district's schools are designated priority schools in any one year, then the DOE may request that the governor declare a state of emergency in the district and take action allowed under the state conservatorship law.

Contact: Washington Cole, Division Director, Office of Instructional Support and Training, Mississippi Department of Education, Jackson, Mississippi

North Carolina

- In 1996, the North Carolina General Assembly enacted legislation called the School-Based Management and Accountability Program. The program is also referred to as the ABCs because of its focus on **A**ccountability for student achievement; the **B**asics of reading, writing, and mathematics; and **C**ontrol and flexibility at the local level.
- This legislation mandated the assignment of Assistance Teams to work on-site at selected low-performing schools for one year. Each year, a selected group of such schools are targeted for mandatory state assistance. As a result of this legislation, the Division of School Improvement hired 60 practicing educators to work with 15 of the 122 low-performing schools identified for the 1997–1998 school year.
- Composed of three to five educators each, there are 12 K–8 assistance teams and three (possibly increasing to five in 2001–2002) high school assistance teams. K–8 teams are composed to provide expertise in reading, writing, and mathematics. High school teams address the core curricular areas of English, mathematics, science, and social studies. All assistance teams have a designated leader with experience as a school administrator.
- The state may mandate an assistance team for any school identified as low performing or any other school requesting an assistance team with priority given to schools identified as low performing. The North Carolina Department of

Public Instruction reviews the progress made in identified low-performing schools at least once annually. Schools may also request the use of a state assistance team. To date, these state assistance teams have served 210 schools in either a mandated or voluntarily requested capacity.

- If a school fails to improve after a year, the assistance team can recommend that its assistance be continued or that the State Board take action by revoking the license of certain staff members.

Contact: Elsie Leak or Jackie Colbert, Division of School Improvement, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, North Carolina

South Carolina

- In South Carolina, legislation from the late 1980s required that the state identify high-needs districts and offer a variety of levels of support to help them improve.

- In 1995–1996, under the leadership of the state school superintendent, the South Carolina Department of Education (DOE) initiated a concept to identify and then provide support to 200 low-performing or high-needs schools with the goal being to reduce the number of students in the bottom quartile through a program of direct assistance to classroom teachers.

- The DOE organized an Office of Technical Assistance (OTA) with a staff, called "Essential Friends," assigned to work with specific schools. The Essential Friends were envisioned as brokers of consultant services who were to directly help teachers. The state provided each identified school with roughly $7,000 to use for consultants. In 1995–1996, the OTA provided 156 identified schools with 106 consultants; in 1996–1997, the OTA provided funding for 49 consultants who had shown themselves to be effective in the previous year.

- The OTA also started hiring Master Teachers to work with identified schools for 20–30 days per school year to demonstrate lessons and coach teachers in their classrooms. In general, the OTA found such Master Teachers to be more effective than providing consultants to the schools identified. Special Education Master Teachers were hired to work with schools that had an over-representation of minorities in their special education programs.

- The Master Teacher Program was written into legislation in the South Carolina Education Accountability Act of 1998 (called Teacher Specialists On Site). These teachers have a 200-day contract with the DOE, are on leave from their districts, and are eligible to serve for up to three years. From a pool of candidates selected by the DOE, local superintendents of identified districts interview and select Teacher Specialists On Site candidates to serve in their districts. The Teacher Specialists can work at a site up to three years. They must teach a minimum of three hours per day on average. Their duties are to "assist the school in gaining knowledge of best practices and well-validated alternatives, demonstrate effective teaching, act as a coach for improving classroom practices, give support and training to identify needed changes in classroom instructional strategies based upon analyses of assessment data, and support teachers in acquiring new skills." In addition, a Principal Mentor Program run by the DOE selects outstanding principals to work one-on-one with principals from identified schools or districts.

- The goal of the 1998 law is to establish a performance-based accountability system for schools and districts and to improve teaching and learning so that students are equipped with a strong academic foundation. When a school's performance is deemed "unsatisfactory," the State Board of Education appoints an external review team to examine the school's and the district's educational programs, actions, and activities. The teams work with the schools and make recommendations to the district trustees and the State Board of Education.

- A three-tiered system allows the DOE to deliver technical assistance to the extent and to the level that is appropriate. The lowest-performing schools in Tier 1 will receive the year-long services of a lead principal working alongside the seated principal, a curriculum specialist, and Teacher Specialists On Site. Tier 2 schools will be assisted by a full-time curriculum specialist, the Teacher Specialists On Site, and math and science regional hubs. Tier 3 schools will receive technical assistance from two-member DOE teams. In addition, funds to reduce class size, to implement alternative schools, to develop homework centers, and to provide teacher training and assistance grants will be provided to all groups.

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Summary of State Roles

As mentioned above, every state's design of its assistance program is somewhat unique. The programs of assistance differ on a number of dimensions: under what conditions assistance is mandated or requested, how intensive the assistance is (number of team members, etc.), relative emphasis on assistance versus evaluation roles ("coach" versus "cop"), how the district is involved, and the kinds of assistance offered (school improvement versus individual teacher or principal coaching).

- As of 1999–2000, Alabama has used an approach that puts a **full-time teacher on contract** with the state (Special Service teacher) in each "Alert" school. The teacher works with a state department liaison to get help from other experts as needed.

- In Florida, the focus has been on working **with and through districts**

in a collaborative fashion to support improvements at identified "D" and "F" schools. The state law requires districts to develop a two-year plan of assistance to identified schools. The state does provide assistance teams to some individual schools, but they are flexible arrangements provided in collaboration with local districts (not mandated by the state).

- Georgia provides for **two levels of assistance** to schools. The first level of assistance for a school can be requested by its district and is provided by a team from a regional educational service agency. Such a team is called an Instructional Care Team. For schools not progressing, a more serious and directed level of assistance is provided through a state-mandated (beginning in 2003) School Improvement Intervention Team that will be assigned for a school year with the team leader expected to be in the school every day.

- Legislation in Mississippi and North Carolina describes an evaluative role for the mandatory assistance teams assigned to identified schools. That is, as part of their assistance duties in North Carolina, assistance teams are expected to evaluate teachers twice a year and can make recommendations for personnel decisions. These teams, as their name implies, are intended as assistance teams but at the same time are assigned as mandatory. In Mississippi, within 15 days of being identified as low performing, a school is assigned an Evaluation Team. This outside team starts off the improvement process by visiting sites and analyzing data and concludes the process by delivering an Evaluation Report to the school, a very public document that can include reference to specific individuals needing improvement plans. The evaluative tone continues as principals and teachers can be dismissed for lack of improvement over specified periods of time.

- In South Carolina, 1998 legislation provides for external review teams when school performance is rated "unsatisfactory." Subsequently, three levels of assistance are provided based on the extent of the schools' needs. The highest level of assistance that is provided to Tier 1 schools includes a yearlong principal mentor, a curriculum specialist, and Teacher Specialists On Site.

(For more information on state programs of assistance nationally, see **www.ccsso.org**.)

The Role of the District in the Assistance Process

Some lessons learned in providing assistance to schools, as reported by leaders from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction at the SERVE-sponsored meeting of state departments (August 2000), had to do with the role of the district leadership. They reported that

- Superintendent and central office support is key to quick acceptance of a state assistance team in low-performing schools.

- Sometimes there is a perception by low-performing schools that they are out there by themselves with inadequate support from or communication with their central offices.

- Central office staff should be collaborative partners with assistance teams to ensure that a school is able to sustain its growth when assistance teams leave.

Regarding this third point, the North Carolina leaders described a school in which a state team's year of assistance was undermined when the following year district leaders reassigned some of the school's staff to other district schools. Creating (through reassignments) a revolving door of new staff at low-performing schools never gives the school culture a chance to gel around a vision for the school that staff can commit to and work toward. Given that 1) studies of effective high-poverty schools find a high level of faculty commitment to a vision of continuous improvement of the instructional program and 2) this kind of working culture among faculty may not evolve significantly in a year's time, constant staffing changes by the district are likely to disrupt whatever progress toward building a continuous improvement cycle has been made by an assistance team. Thus, a district office that is not committed to building the internal capacity of the staff at a school to work together as a team over time to improve the instructional program can undermine a state team's assistance efforts.

Other lessons learned had implications for district action. Principals in identified schools often needed help in maintaining and recruiting teachers and in developing their skills as instructional leaders. Neither of these challenges is easily solved by direct assistance from states to schools without ongoing district leadership and involvement.

State assistance that focuses only at the school level may have difficulty effecting sustained change. In fact, the second point made about the perception of some schools that district leaders were not as supportive as they could be suggests that perhaps the state assistance efforts in such a district would be better targeted at developing capacity and leadership at the district level. That is, it is somewhat problematic to work at the school level if the lack of effective district support and leadership is part of the school's problem.

There is emerging research literature on districts with impressive gains in student achievement that supports the idea that states should consider the merits of considering districts as the first line of assistance to low-performing schools. The Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas studied ten high-poverty districts in Texas that were achieving impressive results. These districts succeeded in getting one-third to all of their high-poverty schools (schools in which 50% or more of the students meet the criteria for free or reduced lunch) to meet the state's "Recognized" or "Exemplary" status. Through interviews, observations, and document review, the researchers identified three leadership dimensions present in all the districts.

- District leaders listened and created a sense of urgency about change.

- District leaders created an environment in which improving instruction became a focus for every school.
- District leaders realized that challenging goals were useless unless staff had the "know how" to better meet students' needs in the classroom.

Similarly, the Evaluation Section of the Division of Accountability Services in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction studied several districts in which high-poverty and/or high-minority schools were making noticeable achievement gains (*Evaluation Brief*, NCDPI, 2000). They described district roles and strategies they found that seemed to provide direction and support to schools. In addition to the three roles found in the Texas study, the North Carolina report mentioned (a) district-wide strategic planning that helps focus improvement efforts across schools, (b) central office staff who are very visible in schools (e.g., weekly), (c) central office staff who perceive themselves as a technical assistance or resource arm for schools, and (d) a clear sense of ownership for all students in the district. According to the report:

> While it is likely more difficult for districts that are both geographically large and have a very diverse student enrollment to engender a sense of community, the districts we visited typically see their students as "our" students. They are determined to demonstrate that all students can learn to high levels. There is a sense of personal accountability for their students and a belief that everyone has a part to play. No one is off the hook. Thus, while a sense of community and expectations of high performance are ultimately conveyed by the teacher and the school, the district supports those expectations by creating a sense of community for the schools and being part of the team. This sense of partnership often includes parents, students, and community/business groups. (NCDPI)

The NCDPI report noted that "work with low-performing schools by the State's Assistance Teams and the School Improvement Division has shown that these same practices typically are not in place for low-performing schools and districts."

Florida, perhaps because of its large size, is the only one of the six states that has elected to work primarily with and through districts in providing assistance to schools. What is the response of districts to the state mandate requiring each district with "D" or "F" schools to develop and implement a two-year plan of "increasing individualized assistance and intervention for each school"? The following is one district's reflections. The account was written by Patricia Schenck of Bay District, Florida, who was assigned to work as a district coach with an elementary school.

The Role of District Coaches

by Patricia Schenck

In the spring of 1999, schools in Florida received their grades. Four schools in Bay District were identified as "D" schools, and district administrators began the challenging work of identifying strategies to provide assistance to those schools. At the direction of the superintendent, a district assistance plan was created for the 1999–2000 school year.

The district plan focused on a goal of continuous progress and long-term improvement. The plan also recognized the short-term reality facing each school. Immediate strategies were needed to remove the schools from the "D" list. Keeping these factors in mind, the district assistance plan outlined some short-term strategies, including allocations of funds, analysis of school data, staff workshops, and support-group meetings with the schools. The plan also included long-term strategies designed to promote systemic change and a new culture of success within each school.

The most significant long-term strategy put in place by the district was the assignment of a district coach/facilitator to each "D" school. This was intended as an additional layer of support for these schools. Specific duties of the district coach evolved in conjunction with each school staff to ensure that individual school needs were addressed. It is important to note that coaches were not brought in to **evaluate** school performance or identify weaknesses. Rather, coaches were asked to be **facilitators** and, thus, became part of the school team.

Participating schools reported several benefits after one year. They reported that their coaches helped them identify goals, organize improvement efforts, allocate resources more effectively, and remove obstacles to learning. As a result of the success of this kind of assistance, the district coaches were given two-year assignments to continue to help their schools. This assistance to low-performing schools became the number one priority in the district.

What does it take to assist a low-performing school serving an at-risk population of high-poverty students? The answer to this question is highly complex and specific to the school and student body involved. The following are four basic reform efforts that proved successful: ensuring multi-leveled leadership and support, establishing a culture of success, implementing a strong literacy program, and providing comprehensive and ongoing staff development.

Instructional Leadership and Support: The development of leadership capacity is vital to systemic change within an

organization. By assigning a District Coach, an extra layer of support and leadership was provided for the school. As a result, efforts were organized at a faster rate, and obstacles were removed that otherwise might not have been. In effect, the District Coach served as a broker between district and school staff members.

Culture of Success: For many low-performing schools, facing the daily challenges associated with state accountability, lack of parental and community support, high-poverty and mobility rates, and lack of necessary instructional materials can overwhelm and sometimes cripple improvement efforts. Confronting these issues was an ongoing challenge that involved continuing dialogue to address specific staff concerns. Strategy meetings were conducted that assisted teachers in moving beyond denial, blame, and excuses to the establishment of team strategies for improvement. Celebrating short-term successes helped build both student and teacher confidence.

Strong Literacy Program: Research shows that many students in low-performing schools lack the necessary background and early experiences in written and oral language. Consequently, these students lag behind and frequently fall below grade level in language skills. To address these deficiencies, a comprehensive, research-based reading and writing program was organized and implemented. Classroom strategies focused on rigorous lessons in a tightly aligned curriculum. Frequent diagnostic and formative assessments were used to target at-risk students and provide intensive extra assistance to bring students up to expected grade-level performance.

Comprehensive and Ongoing Staff Development: Teachers in low-performing schools need specific instructional strategies to assist at-risk students that are quite different from strategies that are successful with more advantaged students. Therefore, teacher-training programs were developed to meet the specific instructional needs of the student population. In addition, ongoing assistance was provided, following training, to ensure that these instructional strategies were transferred into classroom practice. Observing models of these strategies in place in schools with similar demographics and student populations assisted teachers during implementation.

As the above account illuminates, some districts are highly capable and well situated to provide ongoing assistance to help low-performing schools develop a deeper capacity for meeting the challenges of students at-risk from poverty. Why haven't they been providing this kind of assistance all along?

One district leader explained that in his district it was common knowledge which high-poverty schools had become demoralized and pessimistic about their students' ability to learn. However, the district culture was such that schools were fairly autonomous units (as encouraged through site-based management). A mandate such as that provided by the Florida law requiring districts to develop assistance plans for their "D" and "F" schools gave the district staff the credibility they needed to get more intensively involved in improving functioning at such schools.

The discussion of the district role suggests that states can indirectly provide support to low-performing schools by strengthening district capacity and responsibility in several ways.

One state strategy could be to provide opportunities for district leaders to self-assess and reflect on their leadership approaches and improvement strategies in light of emerging knowledge of districts like those in the Texas study that have begun to get higher levels of achievement across the majority of schools in the district.

Such successful districts are showing the importance of treating schools in the district as part of a larger system motivated by a common vision and goals which focus on building teacher professionalism and encouraging growth and reflection. This systemic view of a district is in contrast to districts in which schools function as a collection of independent contractors vying for recognition and resources.

A second strategy, used in Florida, for example, requires districts to play a role in designing and providing direct intervention assistance to their identified struggling schools. Requiring districts to develop a plan for directly assisting their low-performing schools is a first step. However, it may well be that not all districts in a state have the know-how to provide support successfully to their schools.

Perhaps a next step in increasing the capacity of districts to help their low-achieving schools is for states to provide feedback to districts on how they might improve their plans to assist such schools. For example, state-sponsored site visits to districts for the purpose of examining how the district is assisting its low-achieving schools and helping them reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their assistance might improve the quality of the assistance.

Some districts, because of their small size or lack of experienced staff, may not be able to provide intensive assistance to their low-performing schools. These might be the conditions under which a state sends a team into the schools.

Conclusion

Experience suggests that the depth of challenges faced by low-performing schools (e.g., low levels of community involvement and economic resources, difficulty finding and keeping qualified teachers, inexperienced leaders) means that problems are unlikely to be "fixed" in one or two years by an outside team without significant district involvement and without continued development of other supporting state policies and programs. Some assistance teams are finding, in some situations, that it may be difficult to separate assistance to schools from assistance to districts in better supporting the schools.

What are some of the key questions states and districts may need to ask themselves about the assistance process?

1 One question has to do with stabilization of staff. If the situation is such that teachers and administrators are constantly moving in and out of the school, it will be difficult for the school faculty to develop a commitment to and ownership of a school improvement process. Thus, one issue in such a revolving door school

is how can the state and district work together to get some continuity of staffing and ownership going among the people who work there?

2 A second question has to do with is the school ready to take on the complexities of improving the instructional program in a meaningful way? Schools differ in their readiness to take on the complexities of comprehensive reform.

The High Performance Learning Communities (HPLC) Project is a five-year project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Its purpose is to test strategies that can help high-poverty schools improve and become high performing (see **www.ed.gov/offices/OERIhplc.html**). As part of their work with a consortium of low-performing schools in California and Oregon, the project identified the varying levels of readiness for comprehensive reform.

Project reports suggest that whatever external reform package a school might choose takes certain prerequisite implementation skills. Implementation seldom follows a tightly prescribed linear order despite the plans laid out by designers. The successful implementation of an external reform requires a great deal of skill in adapting the reform and making it work for the particular school context. Some schools are more ready than others to implement comprehensive reform packages.

In the HPLC framework, readiness for reform depends on

1) The school's capacity to engage in collaborative planning, which is in part determined by the skills of the principal and the degree of institutionalized collaborative structures that exist

2) The school's willingness and buy-in to the need for change

3) The school's degree of shared vision for student learning

In the HPLC experience, low-performing schools are in different places regarding these three dimensions, and where they are has implications for the kinds of outside intervention strategies that should be used. See **www.rppintl.com** for more information on strategies for assisting schools.

3 A third question is suggested by a study of seven schools on probation in Maryland (Mintrop et al., 2001). The analysis of school improvement at the seven schools showed that being on probation played out as increased rigidity of functioning (requiring surface compliance of teachers with lesson plans, tracking easily surveyable teacher behaviors, sweeping standardization of instructional activities, and extensive test preparation schemes). Administrators reacted to being in charge of a school "on probation" as a

> personal performance challenge that put their careers at stake. Either they became invisible and detached from teachers; in this case, the school could not improve, rather fragmentation, dissension, and dissatisfaction among faculty intensified. Or they became enforcers; in this case, the school rigidified its operations and hierarchy. In neither case did probation trigger organizational learning. Teachers were unable to learn from their performance status. Performance goals were fixed, programs, curricula, and reform models were mandated, instructional specialists had their marching orders, and principals demanded and enforced compliant behavior and program implementation. Chosen strategies, promulgating increased standardization and control, fostered rigidity as well. (Mintrop et al.)

The pattern the researchers saw across the seven schools studied was "determined principal management," additional resources for new specialist personnel and teacher-training efforts, and top-down enforcement of external programs rather than intense organization-wide learning. Mintrop et al. concluded,

> Our findings suggest that organizational rigidity with its narrowing of options, its strengthened hierarchy, and surge in focused energy may contribute to the modest improvement these schools accomplish on the (state) performance-based test, but the lack of learning among faculty may be one factor that makes further improvements unlikely.

This study is important for what it might suggest to those in assistance roles to such schools. If the natural tendency of schools under performance pressure is to become more top-down and rigid, it makes organizational openness, innovation, and learning less likely to occur. Assistance teams may need to ask themselves whether the type of assistance they are providing is contributing to increased rigidity or increased school innovation and organizational learning. Continuous improvement over a long period of time demands the commitment of staff.

When asked "what conditions nurture genuine desire for continuous improvement on the part of teachers and principals?" Peter Senge responded:

> The source of such desire is always the same—people slowing down to answer these questions: What do I really care about? What do I really want to create? These questions and others like them are the source of continually rediscovering and recommitting ourselves to our sense of purpose, to our core values, and to our particular aspirations. There is no substitute in sustaining innovation. When people come together to deal with practical problems, it's important for them to consider what they want to create, not just what they want to fix. This approach fosters shared aspirations. Most people in organizations—and teachers are no exception—are obsessed with solving problems. They spend their lives trying to fix things that are broken. This obsession with problem-solving diverts our attention from a far more important activity, which is creating the new. What I mean by creating, is directing our energies into bringing things into reality that we really care about. And this is

> a profound shift, not just a semantic difference. When we're solving problems, we're trying to get rid of things we don't want. When we're creating, we are bringing into reality things that are valued by us. (Sparks, 2001)

Assistance teams may want to consider the degree to which they are balancing short-term goals (e.g., getting "off the list") with the more long-term goal of engendering staff commitment to bringing into reality their vision for the school.

There are no easy answers to the question of how to encourage high levels of learning in schools facing the extreme challenges of poverty, but it is a question that needs continuous attention and reflection from states and districts working together.

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Appendix:

Other State/District Policies that Support Improved Conditions in High-Poverty Schools

Beyond direct assistance to selected schools or districts, most states are developing a constellation of policies to support their schools struggling to overcome the challenges of poverty. Below are strategies currently being implemented that address some of the known barriers to success in high-poverty schools. The list is not meant to be an exhaustive list of what every state is doing in each area, but rather a sampler of the kinds of things states are doing.

Teacher quality: Hundreds of studies have shown that "fully prepared" teachers are more effective than those who are "unqualified." Yet schools that serve economically disadvantaged students have a disproportionate number of unqualified teachers. Because state accountability policies that identify low-performing schools have made it even more difficult for such high-poverty schools to attract good teachers, some states are implementing policies to help these schools.

State policy response: In Mississippi, the state provides financial incentives to recruit teachers to work in high-poverty areas. They provide a $1,000 signing bonus for teachers willing to work in such areas. The teachers can receive an additional $3,000 if they purchase a home and commit to stay in the system for at least three years. In addition, the Mississippi Teacher Corps and the Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program pay for Master's degrees for participants who commit to teach in a critical-need district.

(See **www.olemiss.edu/programs/mtfp/overview** and **www.olemiss/edu/programs/mtc**.)

Florida is also trying to provide incentives for teachers to work in low-performing schools. There is currently $12.5 million for schools identified as "D" or "F" schools to recruit and retain excellent teachers.

The minimum award is $1,000, and the maximum is $3,500. Each district decides, according to its own definition, who qualifies as an "excellent" teacher.

Class size and school size: Evidence suggests that 25–30% reductions in class size in the early grades produce significant gains in student achievement, other things being equal. Students benefit when teachers are better able to use their knowledge and skills, when they have more time to spend with each student, more chances to read student work, more time to prepare, and so on. Most important to our discussion, studies of class size have shown that the greatest benefit of smaller class sizes in the primary grades accrues to minority students.

(See **www.serve.org** for research on class size.)

In one analysis recently completed by the Rural School and Community Trust Program (**www.ruraledu.org**), the researchers concluded that "the less affluent the community served, the smaller a school should be to maximize the school's performance as measured by standardized tests." That is, as schools become larger, the negative effect of poverty on student achievement increases. They recommend that states consider policies that favor smaller schools in less affluent communities.

(See **http://aelvis.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc988.htm** for *Current Literature on Small Schools* by Mary Anne Raywid, January 1999.)

State policy response: In South Carolina, under the Education Accountability Act of 1998, schools that are rated "unsatisfactory" or districts designated as "impaired" receive priority in funding provided by the General Assembly to reduce class size in grades one through three to a ratio of 15:1. Other districts receive class-size funding based upon the number of free/reduced-lunch eligible children. Districts choosing to implement reduced class size must track students served in classes with the 15:1 ratio for three years so that the impact of the reduction can be evaluated.

Alabama instituted a class-size reduction initiative beginning in 1998. The goal of this program is to help schools improve student achievement by adding additional, highly qualified teachers to ensure that class size—particularly in the early grades—is reduced to no more than 18 children per class.

Principal leadership: Just as it is difficult to find and develop teachers with the special skills needed to work with disadvantaged students, so it is difficult to find and develop principals as instructional leaders for challenging school settings. In some states, retirements will soon put an extra burden on the need for good leaders. States like North Carolina and Florida, that have been providing assistance to identified low-performing schools for several years, report that building up the capacity of school administrators to act as instructional leaders is a key area of need.

State policy response: In South Carolina, there are a range of state programs that support principal development. One is including a principal assessment program in which all candidaters are assessed by the SDE's Leadership Academy prior to permanent appointment as a principal. Second is a Principal Induction Program for school principals serving as head building administrators for the first time. A third is an Administrator Development Program that requires all principals to develop an annual plan for professional growth with the SDE and districts sharing training opportunities and expenses. And finally, there is a Principal Mentor Program in which principals in the "greatest needs" districts are assigned principal mentors by the state department. The mentors are active or retired principals who are proven leaders and who are hired by the SDE. They must work at a designated school site with the principal and spend at least one day per month.

In Alabama, Samford University has designed a "Leadership for High Performing Organizations" professional development program targeting school principals. The program is being used with all principals in schools identified by the state department as "Alert" schools. The goal of the program is to help principals become well-prepared instructional leaders who understand teaching and learning, curriculum and assessment, and who can share leadership and decision-making processes with teachers. Principals in the program tackle authentic problems that ask them to work together as teams. The model is rooted in the belief that school principals must be good problem-solvers to be successful with leading continuous school improvement.

Reading instruction: Disadvantaged students frequently enter school behind in their literacy experiences and skills. Thus, schools dealing with many disadvantaged students must find ways to help these students "catch up" developmentally on critical reading skills. At the same time, many schools are finding that teachers have had limited coursework in how to teach reading and particularly lack knowledge in how to teach reading to disadvantaged students who may struggle due to their lack of home experiences. Thus, states are implementing comprehensive programs to improve early literacy instruction.

State policy response: Georgia is providing additional resources to enable low-performing schools to institute new programs that have an intensive focus on reading. Alabama and Mississippi have initiated extensive grant and other support programs for improving reading statewide. In Mississippi, the Barksdale Reading Institute was established to promote literacy, particularly in schools whose students are performing poorly, especially in reading. Together with the federal Reading Excellence Grant, funds are being used to implement the Mississippi Reading Reform Model. (See **www.bri.olemiss.edu/bri.proposal.html** and **www.mde.k12.ms.us/extrel/Readgrant.htm**.)

In Florida, the Commissioner of Education has the power to give the "D" and "F" schools in the state preference in awards of state and federal grants. One example was the FLARE (Family Literacy and Reading Excellence Program), a multi-year award that provided about $25 million to individual districts to use the money to design and implement reading programs.

The Alabama State Department of Education developed the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) to provide professional development on literacy. The program provided a 13-day summer professional development experience that explored every facet of literacy with school teams. The ARI schools have the added benefit of a Reading Specialist who works with struggling readers half of the day and the other half of the day supports teachers as they increase their skills in reading instruction.

Extra time and support for students to "catch up": Holding students to higher standards and requiring students to take more challenging courses means schools and districts need to find ways (e.g., extended learning opportunities) to provide additional assistance to struggling students. Avenues for providing this "extra time" involve year-round, before-and-after school, and summer school programs. Leaders need resources if they are to provide this extra academic assistance. In addition, districts must be allowed flexibility in designing promotion policies such that struggling students don't automatically become retained students.

State policy response: In North Carolina, the Department of Public Instruction created a coordinated effort to funnel assistance to high-needs schools. Funds from Goals 2000, CSRD, Title I, and other state sources were pooled and used to provide additional resources to high-poverty schools. Currently, grants offer substantial funding for low-performing and at-risk school systems through a competitive grant process. Technical assistance and professional development are critical components of the grants and of school improvement. In addition, the Department offers funds for remediation and intervention for students.

In Mississippi, collaboration between the state department, the Attorney General's Office and Big Brothers/Big Sisters has produced an expansion of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs throughout the state to promote mentoring and after-school programs for students.

Florida allocates additional resources to low-performing schools through the Supplemental Academic Instruction Fund. In 1999–2000, $662 million was provided to districts in the form of block grants.

Alabama uses at-risk funds for remediation efforts. Twenty percent of the allocated funds must go to community agencies for extended-day-remediation programs. School systems develop an RFP that includes a list of identified needs that is distributed to community agencies, which submit proposals to address the needs. In addition, the Governor's High Hopes for Alabama Students program allocates funds on behalf of each student failing any section of the Alabama High School Graduation Exam. The allocations go to the high school and are used for immediate assistance to those who failed. At least 25% of the funds allocated to each school are used to provide tutors and mentors from within the community.

Ensuring young children are ready for school: Students who start school behind often have difficulty catching up. Schools serving poor communities tend to have more students who are lagging behind in their literacy development. Thus, a sound early childhood education is critical to helping students enter school ready to learn.

State policy response: Georgia is the only state in the region that currently provides funding for pre-K programs that can be accessed by every student in the state.

In Mississippi, collaboration between the Mississippi Department of Education and Head Start has resulted in the placement of a Head Start office within the Department. These groups are now working together to promote early childhood education opportunities for Head Start children. The DOE is supporting legislation and funding in support of mandatory preschools.

In North Carolina, dropout prevention/at-risk funds flow automatically to districts and may, at the discretion of the district, be used for pre-K programs.

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